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FOR EAP/MTS AND G/IWI

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KWMN](#) [KPAO](#) [MY](#)  
SUBJECT: NOMINATION FOR INT'L WOMAN OF COURAGE - AMBIGA  
SREENEVASAN

REF: STATE 99729 - INSTRUCTIONS

Summary

1. Embassy Kuala Lumpur nominates Ambiga Sreenevasan, Malaysian Bar Council President, for the Woman of Courage award for her active involvement in protecting human rights, promoting the rights of woman, and promoting the rule of law through judicial reform. Ambiga's efforts, such as the unprecedented September 2007 "March for Justice," interfaith forums to discuss religious conversion and the legal rights of Muslim women, and her passionate defense of the rule of law have drawn high praise from Malaysian civil society, as well as death threats and intimidation from opponents. Undoubtedly, Ambiga's efforts have significantly and positively advanced fundamental principles of human rights and democracy at a pivotal time in Malaysia, and in doing so reflect key points in the President's Freedom Agenda. End Summary.

Bar Council President; March for Justice

2. Ambiga Sreenevasan an accomplished lawyer, became President of Malaysian Bar Council in March 2007. Ambiga emerged on the national scene at a pivotal time in the country, as Malaysians increasingly voiced their expectations for more transparent government and strengthened rule-of-law.

She used her position to turn the Bar Council into the most significant, non-partisan voice for reforms to bolster democracy and human rights. Ambiga's activism put the Bar Council at the center of discussion of judicial reform, while avoiding the partisan politics of the 2008 election year.

3. In September 2007, Ambiga organized the "March for Justice" in the administrative capital of Putrajaya. More than 2,000 lawyers participated in the march, unprecedented over the past ten years, which called for judicial reform and the investigation of a tape allegedly showing a key lawyer apparently fixing judicial appointments and judges' case assignments in 1998. Two months after the march and an intense lobbying campaign led by Ambiga, the GOM announced establishing a Royal Commission to investigate alleged judicial manipulation. The commission found credible evidence of manipulation by the former Prime Minister and others, and offered corrective recommendations. Ambiga's mobilization of the Bar Council was a key catalyst for the GOM's move towards judicial reform.

4. In April, the Prime Minister chose to announce his commitment to a number of reform measures, such as judicial appointments committee and compensation for senior judges dismissed by the former Prime Minister, at a special dinner hosted by Ambiga and the Bar Council. Ambiga has consistently supported the establishment of an Independent Judicial Commission to ensure transparency in the promotion and appointment of judges, along with other reforms. The venue for the Prime Minister's announcement was a tribute to

Ambiga's promotion of such reforms, and the Bar Council's critical role in such discussions. Her efforts to promote the rule of law and judicial reform reflect President Bush's Freedom Agenda objective to advocate for good government.

#### Speaking Out for Rule of Law

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¶5. Ambiga has consistently spoken out on key rule-of-law issues that have arisen during a volatile period in Malaysian politics. She raised questions and concerns over the conduct of a criminal investigation into a prominent opposition politician. Ambiga unambiguously condemned the politically motivated arrests of two journalists and an opposition member of parliament using the Internal Security Act, which is otherwise intended for those posing serious threats to national security. Likewise, she spoke out publicly against the government's banning in October of HINDRAF, an activist grouping promoting ethnic Indian rights whose five senior leaders are held without trial under the Internal Security Act.

#### Women's Rights

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¶6. Ambiga engaged the former Women's Minister on inequalities within the Federal Constitution that undermined the legal position of women in Malaysia. Her efforts resulted in the Constitution's amendment and legislation providing women's testimony in Shari'a court equal weight to that provided by men. Ambiga's struggle continues as she fights for the rights of women who converted to Islam because of marriage. Currently, upon dissolution of the marriage,

regardless of the cause, women in most cases are not allowed to return to their original religion if they so desire.

#### Religious Freedom

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¶7. In October, Ambiga organized an interfaith dialogue, entitled "Conversion in Islam," with the intention to discuss possible legal approaches to an issue that continues to generate inter-ethnic tension and constitutional concerns. The day prior to the event, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at her house. On the day of the event, about 200-300 protesters from religious groups, government-linked groups, and conservative elements of the Opposition assembled in front of the Bar Council. Some of the protesters, escorted by police, marched into the Bar Council's building, where the forum was held, forcing its cancellation. In the days following the incident, hardliners called for her detention and she received death threats. Nevertheless, Ambiga has persisted in raising the need to address fundamental constitutional questions related to religious freedom.

#### Nominee's Information

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¶8. Embassy contacted Ambiga Sreenevasa and obtained her concurrence with the nomination. Required information is provided below:

Name: Ambiga Sreenevasan  
Job title/Association: President of the Malaysian Bar Council  
Founder, Sreenevasan Advocates & Solicitor  
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COB: Malaysia  
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KEITH